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ENGLISH SEMESTER, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA.

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A DISCUSSION COURSE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM 1500 TO 1900 ORGANIZED AROUND REPRESENTATIVE MASTERPIECES HAS BEEN CREATED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA. THE COURSE, CALLED ENGLISH SEMESTER, MEETS TWO HOURS DAILY AND IS CONDUCTED BY THREE STAFF MEMBERS TO ACCOMMODATE 35 STUDENTS, USUALLY IN THEIR JUNIOR YEAR. THE NEW PROGRAM PROVIDES AN OPTION FOR STUDENTS WHO WANT SMALLER CLASSES AND A MORE INTIMATE ATMOSPHERE THAN A LARGE DEPARTMENT USUALLY PROVIDES. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ADE BULLETIN," NUMBER 17, MAY 1968, PAGES 12-13. (BN)

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ENGLISH SEMESTER

University of Iowa
by Richard Lloyd-Jones

The Department of English of the University of Iowa has created a single twelve-credit hour course in English Literature, 1500-1900. The discussion course, called the English Semester, is conducted by three staff members to accomodate thirty-five students. It meets two hours a day, five days a week. Although usually one instructor is in charge of the discussion, the others are ordinarily present. On some occasions, the students run their own class, and often visitors are brought in to discuss their own specialty.

Several assumptions underlie the program. In a department with five to six hundred undergraduate majors and five hundred graduate students, the ordinary undergraduate has a hard time identifying himself with the study of literature. He attends classes under first-rate teachers, but he remains merely a digit in a large group. Because large programs must be organized for flexibility, the shifting of enrollment may be so great that he may not recognize other students in his class. Separate courses tend to operate independently, so a student takes a collection of courses rather than a program that is clearly coherent. The faculty members have limited opportunities to teach works outside of their own special field. Frustrations build up on both sides of the instructor's desk.

The English Semester is designed as an option for students who are disturbed by the seeming

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chaos of the large department. The separate three-hour courses still remain--specialists get their day to speak, transfer students can pick up missing credit, those who came to a large university in order to avoid suffocation all have places to go--but the new program permits the department to retain the advantages of large size and still gain some advantages of intimacy. Since the English Semester is ordinarily aimed at the junior year, many of the students who are seeking certification reinforce the experience when they register for the professional semester and practice teaching during the senior year.

The course is organized around representative masterpieces chosen for their intrinsic merit, for their usefulness in representing themes in literary genres, for their fruitfulness in suggesting contrast and reinforcement of ideas and techniques from generation to generation, and for their attractiveness to undergraduates. The resulting list includes eighteen plays, (a heavy selection from Shakespeare), fifteen works of narrative (including Book I of the Faerie Queene and Paradise Lost but still weighted toward the novel), about ten lyric poets treated rather thoroughly and another twenty sampled very lightly, and eight or nine substantial excursions into non-fictional literary prose (weighted somewhat toward the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries).

The reading load is extremely heavy, but because it is coordinated and the pieces are designed to reinforce each other, more close reading can be expected than would be fair in four three-hour courses. In the same way, the weekly papers total no more than what is required in the separate courses, but because the deadlines are spread out and sequence is provided for, the instructional value of the papers can be increased immensely. Too often in separate courses, different instructors give essentially identical and repetitive assignments with only the literary work differing. Special lectures and excursions can be fitted into the program because essentially three instructors control most of the time of the students. For example, the University Theatre has been producing King Lear, so students observed the early blocking of the action as well as the final performance. Although ordinarily the two-hour session is interrupted by a ten minute break, the exact location of the pause can be shifted according to the needs of the discussion. Occasionally, the session simply runs its full course on a single work. The flexibility tends to reduce the emphasis on class hours of credit, the mechanics of the University system and major course examinations.

Any quantitative measurement of the results of the program seem unlikely but there are symptoms of its usefulness. It was announced six months in advance; within a week, the places were filled by students making advanced application. Perhaps seventy-five to one hundred more students requested places. Slightly above a "C" average was required for admission. Some students who had high entrance test scores but low grade averages at the time of their request for admission were motivated sufficiently to bring the grade point up to the admission standard. In general those "weak" students had trouble adapting both to the freedom and the restriction in the program, all have done acceptable work and many have performed rather better than their previous work might have suggested. The three faculty members, Professors John Huntley, Robert Scholes and Richard Lloyd-Jones, found the work enjoyable but demanding. They found that the need to get used to each other and to the students brought them to class ten hours a week during the early stages of the course, and rather more frequently than they expected all the way through. Undeniably, they found it pleasant to teach texts out of their principal periods of interest, but they also enjoyed working with their colleagues in a close teaching situation. In this respect, it borrowed the best features of the close associations of the NDEA Institutes. The fact that the students themselves became a group which developed its own spirit and did much of its own teaching made the program more enticing to the faculty members. In short, they ended up committing rather more time than they expected to the teaching of one course during one semester.